

Interview H0235: Surkhang Wangchen Gelek [tib. zur khang dbang chen dge legs], (USA, 1967) : Part No. 6 of 7

The interviewee was one of the most important Tibetan government officials in modern Tibetan history. He served as a Kashag or Cabinet Minister (Kalön) from 1943-1959. He discusses the Huang Musong mission [from China] and Tibet's new relations with China after the death of the Dalai Lama.

When the 13th Dalai Lama passed away, there were no foreign representatives, but before that, the Sikkim Political Officer [tib. 'bras spyi blon chen] of the Indian Government would come to Tibet once during his 4 year term. It was written in the 1904 treaty [tib. chings yig] [between Tibet and British India] that they would be allowed to come. Every time they came, the Tibetan Government would give them a very nice reception in a house and he would meet the Dalai Lama. There was this kind of system. Otherwise, there was no representative of the Chinese Government. When the Dalai Lama was about to pass away, the Chinese Government sent a Tibetan woman who had stayed in China for a long time as their representative. She came and delivered a letter and returned.

But as soon as the Dalai Lama passed away, as I told you, in the 3rd lunar month, when Huang Musong via Kham, came in a very elaborate (tib. gyepo [rgyas po]) manner with 8-9 people carried in palanquins (tib. gyogchang ['gyogs byams]) carried by Chinese men who were poor people hired by them. When they came to Lhasa, they said that they had come to make offerings for the deceased Dalai Lama (tib. gongtsog chötrin [dgongs rdzogs mchod sprin]) and they had brought lot of things. They also made donations and did these in a very elaborate manner. But when they held these [using English] ceremonies, they said, "Since this is a very important ceremony, please allow us to hoist the Chinese flag on the Potala. They reported this in advance, but at that time, the Tibetan Government held a Tsondu Assembly meeting and said that this will be not allowed because there is no custom of hoisting flags on the Potala Palace. They insisted a lot, but it was refused, so they said if this is not allowed, please allows us to put a small flag on the table along with

many golden religious implements to be offered in front of the Dalai Lama's remains which will be a sign of good omens (tib. tendre chempo [rten 'brel chen po]). They insisted a lot on doing this, but the Tibetan Government still said that this is not allowed and stopped them from doing this. At that time, there was nothing that they [the Chinese] could do.

Then they said that they will do the ceremony according to the ancient customs and held the religious ceremony not in the regular hall for holding the ceremony but in the hall built inside a temple which was called the "new hall" (tib. tsomchen sarpa [tshoms chen gsar pa]). This hall was for doing mourning activities. Although this hall was better than the present one, from early times about 100 years ago, there used to be a bad omen when they held the ceremony in that hall. Therefore, since then, they only held mourning activities in that hall and they never held ceremonies for good omens.

On that day, the Chinese officials wore there [using English] officially. Reting Regent, the Silön and the Kashag and all the Tibetan Kudraks also attended the meeting. In the early times, at the time of the Ambans, when the Dalai Lama passed away there was a custom wherein the Tibetan Kudraks and the Chinese officials would prostrate nine times together when a Chinese would shout. "first prostration" (tib. cha thangpo [phyag dang po]), and when he said something like [using English] ready, then he said 1, 2, 3 and all prostrated three times. Then he said stand up [tib. yar longs] and then they did the second prostration and the third prostration. This was called the nine prostrations (tib. cha gutru [phyag dgu phrugs]).

Q

To whom did they prostrate?

A

To the [using English] body of the Dalai Lama. At that time, although we young ones did not remember about the custom of doing nine prostrations, the elderly Tibetans who had seen this were saying that this was a custom from the Amban era. After the Chinese officials stood in line, a Chinese shouted prostrate [ch. [ke](#) tou] and when he said "one" [ch. yi], they prostrated and then he said two and then three and they did the same thing.

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This was done by the Chinese officials, right?

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A

Yes. The Tibetans didn't prostrate like that. We Tibetans had already prostrated according to the Tibetan custom. After the ceremony was over, they [the Chinese officials] said, "In the past, the friendship between Tibet and China was not that good"

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To whom did they say that?

A

The Chinese representatives told that to the Tibetan Government.

Q

Did they say that at that ceremony?

A

They met the Kashag as they usually do. They called the Kashag to come to their place and said, "Although in the past, the friendship between Tibet and China was distant [tib. mthun sgril rgyang ring po], now we should not act like this. We must be friendly and nice." Dewashung [the Tibetan government] told them, "From early times, Tibet and China had a good priest-patron relationship (tib. chöyön [mchod yon]), but at one time, bad leaders did bad work and made war and did things wantonly, so we became opponents. But now we want to be friendly with you. However, from the time of the dharma kings, Tibet was very powerful and set up the stone pillars [indicating their independence]. But now, a lot of places in the east are under China. From among these places, if we talk about all the [places] where they speak Tibetan, this would be a very long distance (tib. tha ringpo [thag ring po]), but at first the important thing is (tib. khel chewa [gal che ba]) that we, Tibet, needs the 5 areas of Horde [tib. hor de lnga] and Nyarong [tib. nyag rong]." From the Tibetan side, we said we want many places back.

Then the Chinese said, "Regarding these, these don't matter because it is [merely] a matter of the demarcation of the border [tib. sa mtshams gyi yar mar 'di byed yag]. The most important thing is to be friendly." They didn't say anything like [Tibet] is part of China and a subject (miser) of China. What they [Chinese] wanted is that at that time since there was no permanent representative [in Lhasa] [and they wanted to leave one]. But

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they knew that there will no result if they talk with Tibet because the Tibetans would not listen because the British were backing Tibet. And in China, the Japanese war was about to break out and there were many groups [tib. shog kha] inside China and it was very dangerous. Therefore, they didn't have any thought of making war against Tibet.

They just want to show the world that Tibet and China are friendly and didn't want to say that Tibet was a part of China. So they stayed here and then they [Chinese officials] said, "If you want those places, though they are part of China now, most of those places are located in Sichuan and Qinghai. So the Chinese Government has to ask the heads of those places. We can't make the decision right away in an easy manner because we have to carefully find out about [the situations] in these place. So I will report to the Chinese Government and the Chinese Government will talk about these later on. In order to make our conversation easy, we are going to leave the wireless operator and a representative here. There will not be any problem, and it will be convenient and quick for the Tibetan Government to talk to the Chinese Government through the wireless. Otherwise, if you, the Tibetan Government have to talk with the Chinese Government, you have to send a telegraph through [using English] overseas in India which costs a lot of money for both sides."

At this time, the way the Regent and the Kashag were thinking was not that strong on taking over lands and striving for Tibetan independence like the Dalai Lama has been. They were just hoping very much and trying to have tranquility and no war in Tibet during their term of 10-15 years.

If the representative of the [using English] Central Chinese Government was in Tibet, they [Tibetan Government] would not be not scared of Ma Bufang in Xining and Liu Wenhui in Sichuan because when there was some problem at the border the [Tibetan Government] could tell the Central Chinese Government that they [Ma Bufang, etc.] were doing something at the border. At that time, they [Ma Bufang, etc.] were sometimes listening to half of the [Central Government's] orders and sometimes they were not listening at all. It was like doing things wantonly, but they [the Tibetan Government] knew that if the Chinese Government showed that they were in Tibet, this would help not to have disturbances in Tibet. So the Tibetan Government told them, "It is okay to leave the wireless here so when we can talk about the root issue that is that at the time of the dharma kings, the border of Tibet was far way; a long distance away." The [Chinese] neither said yes nor said no. Then they [Chinese] held the ceremony and gave many

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parties and everyone became very friendly, and then he returned. At that time, the Chinese representative who had the power went back to China.

Q

This was in 1934, right?

A

Yes. Then a very knowledgeable person called Li Tiezheng who knew a lot about world [using English] politics came, but he didn't have any title and power in Tibet, although he had a high rank in China called "Legislative Committee Member" [ch. li fa wei yuan]. But when he came to Tibet, he didn't come [using English] officially but there were many young people with him who were said to be his pupils. Some of these knew English just like Englishmen and they were highly educated and were graduates from the university. After he came, he was just practicing religion.

The Tibetan Government knew that he was an official of the Chinese Government and some even said that the Chinese officials were scared of him because he was watching what they were doing on the matters regarding Tibetans, and he was also watching the Chinese. But he never came to the Kashag and talked with the government officials. He was practicing religion and dealing with the monks in the monasteries and talking about knowledge and he was saying that [using English] Buddhism is good and he was practicing religion and he also knew religion well. Later, we came to know that he was [one of] the most important persons in the Chinese Government.

At that time, the Chinese knew the system of Tibet wherein the monasteries and the people practicing religion were powerful. The Tibetans were saying that if the Chinese came, they will destroy religion, so on one hand, the Chinese Government wanted to show that the Chinese believe in religion and they knew religion and they were gentle (tib. jampo ['jam po]) people. On the other hand, they made friendly relations with the monasteries while watching and finding out the situation of Tibet. So he [Li] was staying there in a very humble (tib. nyimchung [snyoms chung]) manner. When Huang Musong came, he didn't bully the peasants (miser) as had been done during the Amban era. They came in a manner like the Sikkim Political Officer came and they gave money and gifts in a very generous manner.

Therefore, all the Tibetans were saying. "Oh! These Chinese are new ones who are not at all the same as the Chinese who came earlier." After some time, they became close

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to the Tibetans. After that, the leader called Zhang Caini stayed for a long time in Tibet. In the past, sometimes the Sikkim Political Officer would come to Lhasa, but there was no Indian representative [staying] in Lhasa. But at that time, the Indian Government sent Hugh Richardson to Tibet saying that he is making offerings for the deceased Dalai Lama and he also stayed in Lhasa. They did the same as the Chinese did, and then after several years, the present Dalai Lama was enthroned [tib. khri phebs] and a representative came from China.

Q

After Huang Musong returned, he left an office there, right?

A

Yes. And he left Zhang Caini, a junior person. After that, Li didn't come and one [official] called Wu Zhongxin came. He was a very high ranking person in China. However, he didn't stay for long. After he returned, a person called Director Kong Chuzhang came who was a high ranking official. When he was in Lhasa, I was in Chamdo. When he came up via Kham, there were about 12-13 leaders under him and there were 10 leaders who were carried in palanquins and came to Chamdo. Kong was from the Tibet Mongolian Office [tib. bod sog las khungs]. He stayed in Lhasa for 2-3 years. These people were very gentle, but there wasn't any talk between the government and those people, and they came to Tibet just to watch. Then Kong returned and Li came.

Q

When did Li come?

A

He came after Kong returned.

Q

In between that time, did they talk with the Tibetan Government?

A

They said that, "The government should send a representative to a big meeting at which there was to be an [using English] election. Many representatives from the [Khamba](#) areas

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under China are coming to the meeting and Tibet is a very big place and if you send representatives they will be able to discuss and make decisions at the meeting. If you don't send representatives, it will be a big problem and it will become a wasted [opportunity]. They said that many times, so it was hard for the government to say no because if we said we are not sending representatives, we will have to buy guns from India and they also will sell only a small amount. And even if they sell things, they would sell the old things used in the First World War and we also had to pay for that. The Chinese had new weapons and China was very near to us.

When there is severe danger in Tibet, they [British] would not care [tib. Ita]. Regarding this, Tibetans had an experience in 1910 when the Chinese arrested 20-30 Tibetan soldiers in Gyantse. Then when they shot them, the representatives of the British and Indians just took photos and they didn't tell them, "Please don't kill them." They were pretending that they didn't know that, and they [the British and Chinese] were staying there like friends. So the so called [using English] politics is very difficult. When the Tibetans became closer to the Chinese, the Indian Government treated the Tibetans better. In the past, at the time when the Chinese were Tibetan's enemy, when we told the Indians to sell guns, they were saying, "It is very hard." and saying, "Can you pay the money right away?" But when we started a friendship [tib. mthun sgril] with the Chinese Government, they [the Indians] even asked us, "Do you want guns? We have extra guns." And they also were making the terms of payments easy like having [using English] a down payment [and keeping the rest] for many years. Later, when the communists came, we owed 7 lakhs of rupees. Then the communist told us, "It is shameful that you didn't pay that. You had better pay it right away." The guns can't be used for making war, but can be used for their iron when building bridges." They [Chinese] were acting very show-offish. Therefore, when the Chinese told the government to send representatives, we didn't formally send representatives, but we sent the [Khendrönlosum](#) (tib. mkhan mgron lo gsum) who were then in China. The custom of [Khendrönlosum](#) started from the [time of the] Chinese Emperors. In the beginning, they left an Amban in Lhasa and we left the [Khendrönlosum](#) in China at the same time. They were equals [tib. gcig pa].

The Chinese Emperors said that they are going to leave an Amban to talk with the Dalai Lama and the Dalai Lama should talk to the Chinese Emperors through the [Khendrönlosum](#). The [Khendrönlosum](#) was also given some powers over the monasteries in China, and it had a kind of big [using English] property. Three Kudrak were sent for the [Khendrönlosum](#) and sometimes, when they got sick, they send some monks as the

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replacement. The three of them were given the order, "Do not tell them [Chinese] that it was a government order, but you can attend the meeting." So they attended the meeting saying that they were Tibetans [but not formally sent by the Tibetan government]..

Q

Did they get guns from China?

A

We didn't need any and we didn't take guns from China. We bought guns from India. We only needed guns for shooting Chinese.

Q

Why did you send the [Khendrönlosum](#) to the meeting?

A

At that time, we need to be friendly with the Chinese. If we didn't have friendly relations, in 1931 Ma Bufang and Liu Zijian jointly made war against us. We lost two of our high ranking leaders, over 100 soldiers and many weapons to Ma Bufang, and we lost a little bit of land also. We also lost a large area of land on the other side of the Derge [tib. sde dge] River like Thargye Gompa [tib. dar rgyas dgon pa] to the Liu Wenhui. At that time, we didn't have friendly relations with [using English] the Central Chinese Government, so when they [Ma Bufang, etc] made war, on the one hand, we fought back in battle and on the other hand, we sent telegraph messages to China telling them, "Please order them [Ma Bufang etc] [to stop]. They are doing this to us." Even after that, Ma Bufang and Liu Zijian wanted to annex [tib. za] those Tibetan lands, but the Chinese Government didn't let them go because they had come close to Tibet and it was as if someone yells, beats a drum and fires guns when a bird is almost getting trapped, the bird will be frightened. So they [the Chinese Government] were telling them [Ma Bufang, etc] "Stay still. Do not act arrogantly." (tib. trog trog ma che/ tsugu dö [krog krog ma byed btsug gi sdod]). If they didn't say that, those leaders [Ma Bufang, etc] might have made war against them [Chinese Government] because they were not depending (tib. ten [rten]) on them [the Chinese Government] and they were also doing that to Tibet. They [Ma Bufang, etc.] were doing two things and staying in between.

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Q

At that time, did the Chinese Government tell them that?

A

Yes. Once he [Ma Bufang] had prepared his horses and was almost going to go to Tibet, but the Chinese Government gave him the order, "You are not allowed at all to go. If you go up, we will do something" [tib. nga tshos 'di byed kyi yin]. So he couldn't come up. At that time, the reason of being friendly with China was because it helped us not to lose the lands and there was no harm at all and the Indians would [as a result] also treat us better. However, when it was confirmed that the Chinese were our enemy, the Indians didn't pay much attention [tib. kha ya byed kyi yod ma red].

At that time we were also afraid that there might be disturbances internally. When the Dalai Lama was there, we didn't need to worry about internal disturbances, but when the Dalai Lama was no more, there was a serious danger that internally [Sendregasum](#) and the Kudrak might cause disturbances and stir up the country. Therefore, they [the government] didn't cause any trouble regarding the representatives in China.

Q

When did the Chinese come?

A

From the time they came in 1934, there were Chinese staying continuously until about 1948.

Q

When did the Chinese hold the first meeting [the big meeting]?

A

That was probably in 1947.